

# Concord-Alewife Planning Study

Meeting Notes: June 25, 2003 Committee Meeting

**Committee Members Present:** Arben Arapi, Doug Brugge, Mitch Goldstein, Chuck Mabardy, Hom Sack, Al Wilson

**City of Cambridge Staff:** Stuart Dash, Iram Farooq, Taha Jennings, Catherine Preston, Susanne Rasmussen, Catherine Woodbury

**Consultants:** David Dixon, Liz Langley, Ron Mallis, Herb Nolan

## Review of the June 7<sup>th</sup> public meeting

The meeting began with a recap of the June 7th public meeting, in which participants were given the opportunity to express their thoughts on what Concord Alewife should look like in the future. Ideas that emerged from the public meeting included: enhanced and accessible open space, new housing, a buffer between the Highlands and the Quadrangle, low impact development, connections and adequate transportation infrastructure. There was generally a consensus regarding some specific ideas:

- Housing on Concord Avenue.
- Mixed-use development in the Quadrangle, with higher density closer to the T and lower density nearer the highlands.
- The importance of major open spaces and addressing environmental issues.
- The importance of linkages as a means to get from the Quadrangle to the Triangle, also the ability to move within the Quadrangle with a real series of streets and avenues that connect to one another.
- The need for further study and understanding of issues around transportation and traffic, and stormwater management.

## Presentation of emerging scenarios

The consultant team presented land use scenarios that are emerging as the planning process moves forward. Particularly, prevailing ideas regarding transportation, open space, land use, and density. The scenarios reflected the following themes:

### 1. Transportation

- An improved street system including existing streets and streets that may need to be created to make better connections
- A potential connection into Quadrangle from Alewife Brook Pkwy
- The importance of a greater role for transit

### 2. Open space

- Take advantage of the existing open space in the area
- A variety of larger and smaller green spaces throughout the site
- Create new areas for open space as well as water; the pond near the Wyeth Building on Cambridgepark Drive is a good example

### 3. Land use

- An increased amount of housing, which helps to build a sense of community (it tends to be a more stable use, commercial and retail development tend to see more steep peaks and valleys)
- No existing housing replaced
- Commercial redevelopment would replace existing commercial developments of lower value
- New retail that is community serving; roughly the same amount of retail that exists now
- New development at the shopping center, such as housing, office, and structured parking to support the retail that currently exists there

#### 4. Density

- Shifts and transitions in density to reflect accessibility to the T
- An approach to zoning and other regulations that make it worth everyone's while to share benefits. By unlocking value, through creating a connection, through creating streets with real addresses, which will cost money, there is a system of benefits that people will be willing to share costs for
- Examine land ownership, buildings, and parcels that exist today, and take a strategic approach to consider how and when things get done
- Streets that already exist becoming the major streets in the area
- Create sub-blocks with primarily pedestrian connections that break down the superblock system
- Create incentives to re-develop higher value development

#### Discussion on emerging scenarios:

Meeting attendees were reminded that this stage of planning is still about developing guiding principles or goal statements; the step of detailing out how things get achieved is still to come. A connection between the Triangle and the Quadrangle over the railroad tracks should prohibit automobiles, and be dedicated to pedestrians, bicycles, and transit such as a shuttle bus service. The crossing should also be believable and provide an incentive for development. A new MBTA commuter rail station is often mentioned as a possibility in the location that may facilitate some kind of crossing over the tracks. It was noted that it could take a significant amount of time before funding for a new station is approved and appropriated. Therefore, the plan for Concord Alewife should work with or without such a station. A shuttle service that is subsidized by industry and businesses in the area was also mentioned as a realistic idea.

There was some discussion about the future look of the shopping center. While it was pointed out that the goal was not to necessarily make the center look the Galleria mall, it could still be enhanced into a more inviting environment. This might include some enclosed space, where people could spend time, gather, eat, and shop. The character of such a space should also have more of a community or neighborhood feel. There was agreement that any improvements should not include a drastic increase in the square footage of retail. Reference was made to Eastern Cambridge where the amount of retail was not increased, but where the demand for retail was increased with an increase in housing, shifting the demand from a regional to a local standpoint.

#### New approaches to stormwater management

There was a brief presentation on stormwater management. Open space is now not only recognized for recreational benefits but also for its effectiveness in stormwater mitigation. The City is working to incorporate Best Management Practices in order to address stormwater management issues and positively effect the quality, quantity, and rate of stormwater runoff. It will also become increasingly important to give considerable thought to the design and maintenance of open spaces dedicated to stormwater management. The open space with water adjacent to the Wyeth building is one example, however these facilities can take a number of different forms. Also, if stormwater management areas are designed well, high levels of maintenance are not as necessary as they would be for more manicured open spaces. It should be noted that this is still an emerging field and experience is limited. It may require several test projects to fully understand the benefits associated with the practice.

#### Committee discussion

There was concern expressed by a number of people about the likelihood of any vision for Concord Alewife being successfully implemented. The "Fish Book" was mentioned as a failed plan for the area, and some wondered how the Concord Alewife Planning Study would be different. City staff noted that there was insufficient incentive for proposed development to be in compliance with the "Fish Book" plan. The Concord Alewife Plan would establish key development criteria within which

a developer must work, and provide reasonable incentives. The plan will also provide potential developers with a level of predictability before presenting to the Planning Board, and in seeking general public support. It was added that it might be helpful to have a better understanding of the reasons for the successes and failures of the Fish Book case study.

A member of the consultant team noted that there has been relatively new construction and redevelopment in North Point, downtown Boston, Kendall Square, and Assembly Square. There are few additional areas in such close proximity to Boston for significant development to occur. As a result, there will likely be much greater pressure in Concord-Alewife in the next boom. New housing construction and proposals in the last 5 years are also an indication of development interest in the area.

A committee member expressed concern about showing development in the Triangle where it can't feasibly happen. One of the consultants responded that the development shown in the Triangle is located primarily on empty parking lots.

Connections between the Quadrangle and Triangle over the rail tracks, between the Quadrangle and Shopping Center across Alewife Brook Parkway, and between the Quadrangle and Rafferty Park were mentioned as good ideas. Another person noted that the pedestrian signal across Alewife Brook Parkway works, however the experience should be made a little less intimidating.

Someone stated that more housing in the Quadrangle would lead to more activity in the area in the evenings. A vision of the shopping center as a place to meet and gather, at a food court for example, was shared. An enclosed space is appealing but would have to be worked out.

Priorities should be based on the chance of success. A member of the consultant team suggested that it would be helpful to find a space in the planning schedule to have Pam McKinney speak with the Committee from a real estate economist perspective in order to provide a better understanding of what might be feasible for a property owner. Also, a primer on the development process in Cambridge would be useful. It was agreed that city staff and the consultant team would work on getting these discussions into the schedule.

A committee member expressed concern that the plan appears to still be lacking in reality or specificity. He noted that the development process in Cambridge doesn't make it very easy to get anything done, therefore, things might potentially stay as they are. The idea that it was important to establish a goal towards which to move was restated, and it was pointed out that the next iteration will involve a much more realistic analysis and will take into consideration which existing buildings are likely to be in the area in 20 years, and which are likely to be redeveloped.

A committee member expressed concern that the plan would fail if a vehicular connection never comes to fruition. On the contrary, there was concern that any vehicular connection over the railroad tracks will be used as a short cut. This topic will be discussed at the next committee meeting, as it is important for careful thought about the types of traffic this connection would invite. Someone mentioned that one potential solution might be a vehicular connection over the tracks that only connects to a parking structure within the Quadrangle.

Another committee member noted that there will be a number of questions for the discussion over the next 6 months. He noted Scenario 2 seemed more appealing, and noted that, from his perspective, it was positive to see that the plan does not displace a resident population. It was wondered what would happen if only a portion of the plan were achieved. Is it possible to come up with some partial plans for the shorter terms? What kind of housing (luxury or mixed income) is necessary for the plan to be viable? While there are city regulations to facilitate the creation of affordable housing, the committee member expressed concern about the economics of

development and whether the incentives are enough to overcome development costs associated with community benefits that are desired in the area. A member of the consultant team reiterated the need to create a mechanism so that value is shared and everyone is treated fairly. He highlighted the fact that these are the kind of issues that the group will have to grapple with in the second half of the planning process.

A member of the committee expressed appreciation in seeing a green buffer between the Highlands and the Quadrangle in each of scenarios. He was interested in hearing the discussion about incentives, particularly where the transfer of development rights could be utilized to shift development away from the Highlands.

A question was raised as to whether this process would address environmental hazards that might be in the study area. A consultant noted that in going forward, the group should perhaps consider creating a mechanism for sharing responsibility for implementing clean-ups that benefit everyone.

**Public Comment:**

At the end of the committee discussion, there was an opportunity for the general public in attendance to comment. Comments are summarized below:

It was noted that the new proposed Belmont development had changed from office to housing because the market for office is apparently dead at this point. It was suggested that if the developer for that proposal is having difficulties, that the committee should be practical and realistic about what could happen in the Quadrangle.

It was suggested that having the appropriate level of infrastructure –both in terms of traffic and sewer systems – for development would be important to consider.

**Next Steps and Administration:**

The next committee meeting will be on July 30<sup>th</sup>. The discussion will focus on traffic and environmental issues.